MANUEL
OF MEXICO

Manuel of Mexico

MANUEL is a little Mexican boy who helps his father on his farm north of Mexico City. His burro, Pedro, carries him into the fields to watch the sheep and goats. Manuel wears a big straw hat called a *sombrero*. It protects him from the hot sun. There are handsome *sombreros*, too, made of felt. But they are not for a boy working in the country.

Manuel's *sarape*, a gaily striped blanket for his head to go through, takes the place of an overcoat. In the city Manuel would not wear his *sarape*. But it is easy to wear when he rides. Under it he wears coarse cotton clothes.

Manuel is one of thirty-three million proud Mexicans who live in beautiful Mexico. For three hundred years Spain ruled Mexico. Then Mexico decided to rule itself. Many Mexicans

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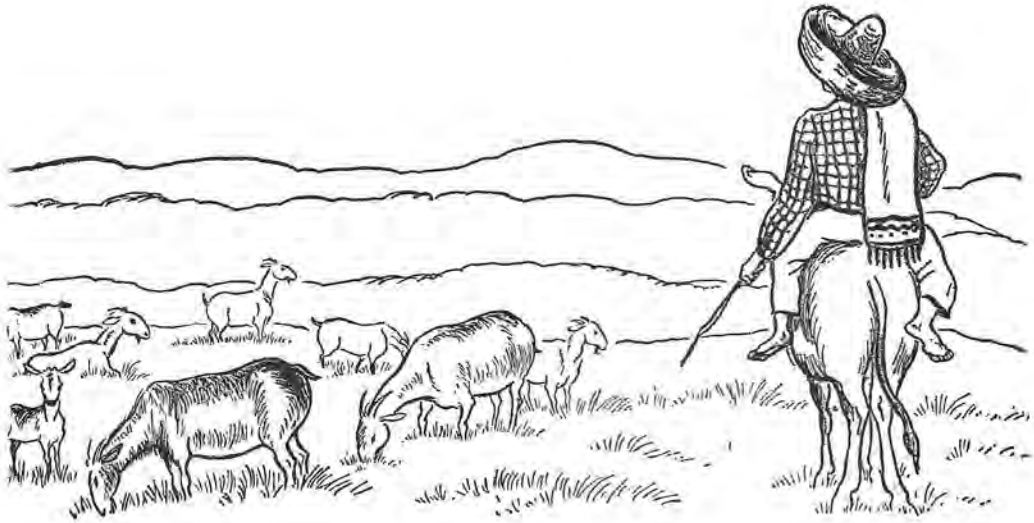
are either of pure Indian or pure Spanish blood. Others are descended from a long-ago Indian mother and Spanish father.

If you look at the map of Mexico you will find it looks like a big horn of plenty. Indeed it is a horn of plenty! When the Spaniards took it away from the Indians over four hun-



dred years ago, they did not know how rich it was. Mexico is only about one fourth as large as the United States, but it has many sorts of riches.

Today you may see there the beautiful pictures of many artists. And where are there such lovely pieces of wood carving or silver work? We have seen one of the farms where sheep and goats are raised. But that is only one part of the country. In the mountains there are silver mines. In yet other parts there are rubber, tobacco, and cotton plantations. And almost everywhere there are men and women busy making fine baskets and weaving colorful fabrics. Some day when Manuel grows up and leaves his father's farm, he may be a great artist. Like many American boys, he may go to the city. But he will never forget his happy days riding over the fields on little Pedro.

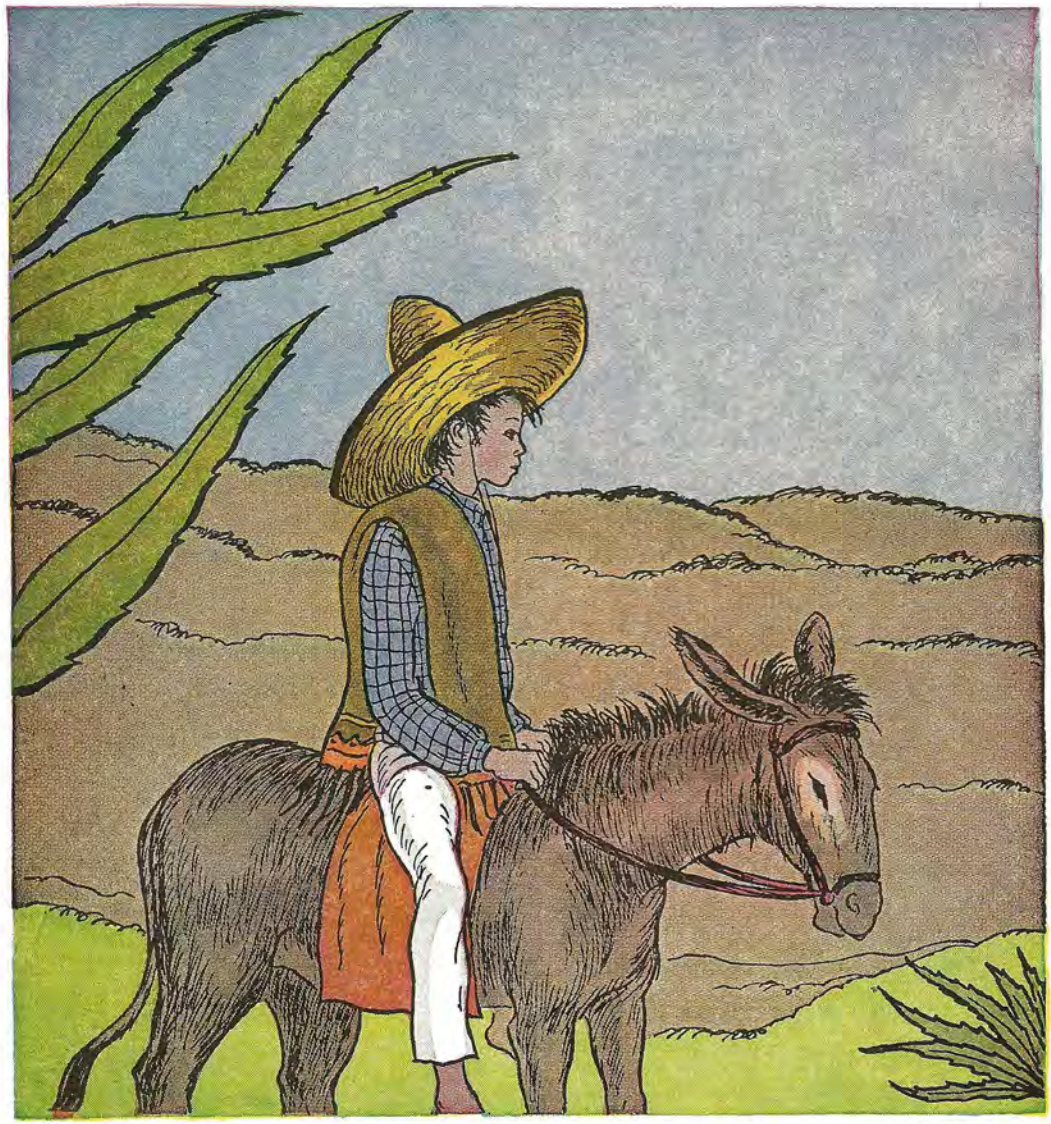
Manuel's mother, like all farmers' wives, is busy from

morning until night. Their little house is made of adobe, a sun-baked clay. It is cool in the summer and warm in the winter. When Mother is not busy cleaning, she is cooking for her family.

If she should invite you to dinner, do not expect ordinary bread and butter. Instead, you would get some freshly baked *tortillas* or corn cakes. Manuel's mother took a great deal of trouble to make them. Kneeling on the floor, she ground the corn between two stones for hours. Then she patted the paste into cakes and baked them.

Mother's dress is of cotton. Out of doors she never wears a hat. Instead, her head is covered with a shawl called a *rebozo.* It is soft and sometimes she carries Manuel's baby sister in it. In the city one may see beautiful and costly *rebozos* worn by ladies there, too.

Let us say goodbye to Manuel and his mother and leave



the dry plains with their prickly cactuses for another part of Mexico. Before we come to Mexico City, the capital of the country, there are miles and miles of great stiff plants growing far higher than your head. You may have seen a single plant like these in the center of a wide lawn and called it a

century plant. Mexicans call it the maguey and they think a great deal of it. No wonder, for the maguey gives them all sorts of useful things for their homes.

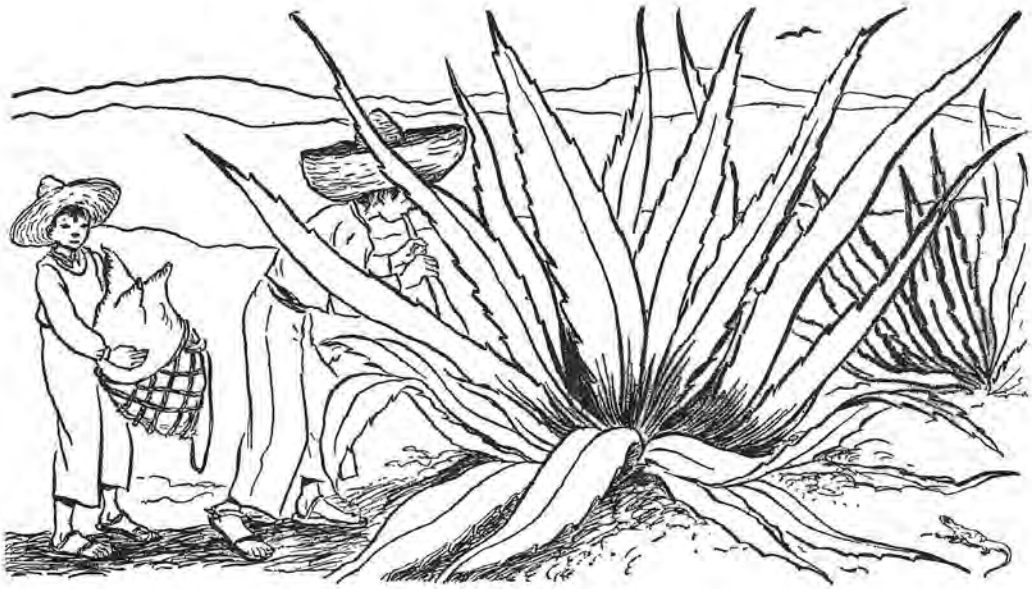
Now, let us join young Alphonso as he rides toward his house. The house is in a green valley. Here in the courtyard

Alphonso's little sister, Tessa, is sitting in the shade, sewing her doll's dress. Tessa has her duties, too. She feeds the chickens and helps Mother grind the corn for *tortillas*. Now she hopes Alphonso will come soon. Maybe he will take her when he and Father collect the maguey sap!

In Mexico they make ropes from the fibres of the maguey leaves and braid them into mats for tables and chairs. They make a fire of the part of the plant which cannot be used for anything else, and over it they cook the roots which they use for food.

But Mexicans grow the maguey plant mainly for its juice. They call it "honey water," and from it make a drink called *pulque*.

Who shall say where this nectar got its name? It is now a part of Mexico. The people of Mexico take the juice from the plant in a strange way. Just before the plant is ripe, they



cut out the center of the stem. A hollow is left as big around as a washbowl. The sweet sap runs into this hollow. Two or three times a day little Alphonso comes with his father to get it. Alphonso's father puts one end of a long, thin gourd in the bowl of sap, then with his lips at the other end, he draws up the sap into the gourd. Next he pours the sap into a pigskin and hangs it over his shoulders; or he carries it away in jars on a donkey's back.

As you leave the maguey plantation behind, you come into Mexico City. This beautiful city, like every other Mexican town, has a park called a plaza in its center. There is a bandstand where the people come evenings and Sunday mornings to listen to the music they love. A very large and beautiful cathedral faces the plaza. There are many fine churches in Mexico.

The houses with their high stone walls and heavy iron bars

look very gloomy. These are the old houses built in the old Spanish manner. Long ago such gloom stood for strength and grandeur, nothing more. Inside, how bright everything is! The house is built around a courtyard or *patio.* Here there are trees and a fountain. Here the children of the family play.

Carmen and Miguel, the city children who live here, invite you to share their Christmas with them. Christmas Day is not the time for fun in Mexico, however. It is a Holy Day. Many families have their own beautiful *crêche* or *nancimiento.* In Mexico, the fun and gifts come later, on January sixth or Twelfth-Night.

The *piñata* is part of the frolic. It is a big jar covered with bright paper to look like a big doll or bird. The children are blindfolded and take turns trying to smash the *piñata.* What a scramble when the candy, nuts, and small gifts tumble out!

So we see that children everywhere work and play. None of us is very different from the other. Manuel rides his burro. Maybe you ride a bike. Alphonso helps with the maguey. Perhaps you run errands for Mother. Carmen and Miguel play in the *patio.* You play in the back yard.

Mexico is a great country. Mexico is our good neighbor. Let us learn to work and play together.